Making meaning: Identity development of Black undergraduate women

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To cite this article: Christa J. Porter & Laura A. Dean (2015) Making Meaning: Identity Development of Black Undergraduate Women, NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education, 8:2, 125-139, DOI: 10.1080/19407882.2015.1057164

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19407882.2015.1057164

Published online: 11 Sep 2015.

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The purpose of this preliminary, phenomenological study was to identify factors that influence identity development and meaning-making of Black undergraduate women at a predominately White institution. The goal of this research was two-fold: to share diverse experiences of Black undergraduate women in order to understand the essence of their lived experience and to identify contemporary perspectives of the duality of being both Black and a woman at a predominately White institution. Findings were clustered into themes pertaining to support systems, maternal and familial influences, articulation of Black identity, and interactions with other Black undergraduate women.

Historical student development theories and models were based upon student populations that were predominately White and male (Chickering, 1969; Erikson, 1959; Kohlberg, 1976). Recent models use more inclusive approaches by identifying specific sub-groups and the intersectionality of identities within the broader college student population (Jones & McEwen, 2000; Kiely, 1997; Phinney, 1989; Reynolds & Pope, 1991; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004). Racial identity development and typology theories for Students of Color provide a deeper understanding of student experiences (Cross, 1971, 1991; Parham, 1989; Parham & Helms, 1985; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998; Sue, 1978; Vandiver, Cross, Fhagen-Smith, & Worrell, 2002). However, Students of Color do not exist as a monolithic group. Therefore, researchers must examine sub-groups within racial identities and across gender to understand more fully the students presently enrolled on campuses. The purpose of this study was to identify factors that influence the identity development and meaning-making of Black undergraduate women at a predominately White institution (PWI). This pilot study was designed to gain a better understanding of Black women students before conducting a larger, more in-depth study. The following two research questions guided this study:

1. How do African American undergraduate, upper division women make meaning of being African American women?
2. What factors influence the identity development of African American women on a predominately White campus?

EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMEN

The experience of African American women in the United States encompasses a rich history. African American women have been subjected to various forms of oppression and exploitation (Beale, 1979; Collins, 1998; Hooks, 1981; King, 1988; Phillips & McCaskill, 1995). Despite their resiliency and accomplishments, U.S. history does not celebrate being African American and female. Institutionalized structures of media, political, and social control have limited African American women to subordinate positions (Collins, 2000). Black feminist thought attempts to confront the broad range of oppression and social injustices of African American women by utilizing an intellectual platform necessary to voice their lived realities in U.S. society. Historical relationships and interactions with oppression, survival, and community must be acknowledged, as current generations of African American women add contemporary perspectives of individual and collective identities. Scholarship within Black feminist thought has shifted inward to examine individual experiences within the context of oppression and conditions of social justice, which attempted to create a collective voice of the experience of African American women (Collins, 2000).

Beale (1979) introduced the term “double jeopardy” to describe the experiences of African American women regarding racism and sexism. African American women confront circumstances that may not arise with White women or African American men (Beale, 1979). Gender and race can be salient individually and collectively; both identities can also shape and influence educational opportunities (Zamani, 2003). King (1988) referred to this concept as “multiple consciousness.” She explained, “the modifier ‘multiple’ refers to not only several, simultaneous oppressions, but to the multiplicative relationships among them as well” (p. 47). Thus, African American women must negotiate multiple identities and recognize how those identities shape their interactions and relationships with others. Understanding and interpreting the complex social roles African American women have played in society in reaction to multiple jeopardies is vital (Dill, 1979). The survival of an African American woman is dictated by her ability to utilize all of her resources (Dill, 1979) as well as by her definition of African American womanhood and by the relationships that surround her (King, 1988).

AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN COLLEGE

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), African American women were the largest female minority group to receive bachelor’s degrees in 2007–2008. African American women earned 9.8% of bachelor’s degrees conferred, compared to Hispanic and Asian American women accounting for 7.9% and 7.0% respectively (NCES, 2010). African American women are a significant sub-group within the larger population of college Students of Color, yet they are not heavily represented within historical or current literature on student
identity development. Holding membership in both marginalized identities can lead to an invisibility of presence and a lack of voice for African American women (Zamani, 2003). As a result of the intersection of race and gender, research should further examine the multiple factors affecting African American women throughout their undergraduate experiences (Zamani, 2003).

Jones (1997) examined multiple dimensions of identity in college women. Findings from her study of a racially diverse sample of women illustrated the following articulations of their identity: the ways in which race matters, multiple layers of identity, influence of family and background, and the search for identity. McCann and Kim (2002) argued that race and gender are experienced simultaneously as opposed to hierarchically and that the relationships between the identities should be explored. More recently, Winkle-Wagner’s (2009) study on Black college women provided insight into the way in which Black women struggle to make meaning of and define their own racial and gender identities in various settings.

Before identity theories are enhanced and/or challenged, an exploration of contemporary perspectives of what it means to be an African American woman in college is imperative. The identity development in each individual African American woman is indicative of her relationships, community, and level of self-awareness. As a result, a closer examination of these individual intra- and inter-personal experiences of African American women is critical for the meaning-making process.

The researchers utilized Kegan’s (1994) understanding of meaning-making as a framework in order to formulate a definition as it relates to African American women. Kegan’s third order of consciousness illustrates that meaning-making occurs in relationship with others. For the purpose of this study, the researchers defined meaning-making as the ability to acknowledge and articulate the experiences through which a Black woman exists and endures within the dominant society in relation to herself and community.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study was grounded in the qualitative, philosophical tradition of phenomenology. A phenomenological approach attempts to capture an individual’s consciousness of their lived experience (Johnson & Christenson, 2008). The purpose of this study was to identify factors that influence identity development and meaning-making of African American undergraduate women at a predominately White institution (PWI). The original research questions and the solicitation of participants both used the term “African American” to describe the target population, and the students who volunteered to participate chose to do so under that invitation. However, one of the insights from the interviews was that these women used a variety of terms to describe themselves, and none identified exclusively as African American. Therefore, the more inclusive term “Black” has been adopted through much of the discussion to reflect the breadth of identities they described.

This in-depth examination of the everyday experiences of Black women at a PWI provided a more accurate understanding of how they interpreted interactions with others and made meaning of their lived experiences (Kvale, 2007). The primary researcher conducted interviews with each
of the participants. Some of the question prompts included the following: What did you learn about being an African American woman, and from whom?; Discuss a time in your college experience that influenced your development as an African American woman; How are you supported as an African American woman?; What challenges do you face on campus as an African American woman?; and What language do you use when identifying yourself? 

Collins (1989) argued, “For ordinary African American women, those individuals who have lived through experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experience” (Collins, 1989, p. 759). Using this definition, four undergraduate participants were considered to be experts concerning their individual experiences as African American women and were invited to give voice to those experiences through this study.

Participants

Participants were members of an organized group of African American women hosted by the cultural center on campus. In order to gather rich data, the primary researcher sought to identify participants who were best able to effectively articulate their lived experiences (Roulston, 2010). An assumption of this selection process was that the women who belonged to this group would be more willing and able to articulate their experiences of being both African American and woman, since they had chosen to be a part of the group and had engaged in on-going discussions of issues related to their identities and challenges. The group was organized in 2006 by both administrators and students as a space in which to talk about the realities of being an African American woman both on and off campus. The group’s facilitators granted permission for the primary researcher to attend a meeting to recruit participants, employing a purposive sampling technique (Johnson & Christenson, 2008) and publicly stating the criteria for participants. Criteria were the following: be an upper division undergraduate student (sophomore through senior status), identify as a woman, identify racially/ethnically as an African American, and participate in the weekly support group. The rationale for including women who had completed their first year of enrollment and those who participated in the support group was that they would be better able to reflect on and articulate their experiences. After the meeting, the primary researcher collected email addresses of those interested and set up individual interviews via email.

Four Black Women

Participants consisted of four Black undergraduate women enrolled at a southeastern PWI. Although the recruitment criteria specified that participants identify as African American, the participants identified with a wider range of descriptors. Academic majors were articulated in the individual interviews but not included in this article because critical masses of African American women do not exist in two of the four majors, and thus the participants might be easily identifiable among their peers and faculty members. The women ranged in age from 20 to 23 and from the second year of enrollment to a fifth year. Three of the four had transferred from another institution, and two of the four were born outside the United States. Briefly, these are their stories:
Leslie, 23, a fifth-year senior, was the only woman who started her college career at the institution. Her mother raised her and her two sisters, and then married her step-father when she was 11. Leslie considers her step-father to be her “real” father. She identified as Black or African American.

Ashley, 21, in her third year, began her college career at a small, religiously affiliated college in the same state as the host institution. She was raised by her mother and identified as Black.

Crystal, 20, in her second year, received an athletic scholarship to play basketball at a smaller school in the state but transferred to the host institution for her academic major. She identified as Nigerian, was born in Nigeria, and was raised in a two-parent household.

Lauren, 20, in her third year, began her college career at a historically Black college in the state but transferred to the host institution to pursue her academic major. She is one of three Black students in her major and identifies as African. Her family moved to the United States 12 years ago. She was raised in a two-parent household, and her older sister will receive a graduate degree from the host institution.

Significantly, the women reported similar perspectives and experiences in spite of the differences in their backgrounds.

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were used to ascertain information about life experiences of participants (Johnson & Christenson, 2008; Kvale, 2007; Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). Since this was a preliminary study, only one interview was conducted with each participant. In order to offer a neutral site for the participants, all interviews were held in private study rooms at the student center. Interviews were up to 60 minutes in length. For anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned and used throughout duration of the study. Miles and Huberman (1994) identified three major activities that occur while analyzing data: (a) data reduction, (b) data display, and (c) verification. By utilizing this process, the primary researcher initially identified all codes and eventually themes present within the data by color-coding salient phrases in the transcripts. She then entered those phrases into an Excel spreadsheet with corresponding colors, and pseudonyms of participants were identified in adjacent horizontal columns. The codes were then further reduced into four themes.

Trustworthiness

Researchers argue that some qualitative studies are superior to others (Johnson & Christenson, 2008). The terms “trustworthiness” or “validity” are used to refer to this difference in quality. Validity, a term used more in quantitative methodologies, refers here to qualitative research that is trustworthy and defensible (Johnson & Christenson, 2008). Trustworthiness in this study was enhanced by member checking and transcript analysis for coding and theme interpretation. Participants reviewed and agreed upon their information in the transcripts, while members of the primary researcher’s academic writing group reviewed data analysis. Additionally, the
primary researcher, who also served as the interviewer, actively engaged in critical self-reflection concerning her own perspective, as the representation of participants’ experiences was most vital.

Use of Language/Terminology

In this article, the term “African American” was used as part of the sample criterion for participation in an attempt to gain a representative voice of African American undergraduate women on a predominately White campus. However, some undergraduate women did not identify with the term “African American” and instead choose to identify as “Black” and/or “African.” How one chooses to identify versus how one is taught and socialized to identify remains a constructive challenge for further discussion within greater Communities of Color. Although one criterion was for women to identify as African American, and the participants volunteered for the study knowing that criterion, throughout the interviews the primary researcher found variation in the terminology used by the participants. Although two of the four women were not born in the United States, and none of them identified exclusively as African American, all four women shared similar perspectives and were able to discuss meaning-making as African American women.

RESULTS

The primary researchers collapsed the codes into the following four themes: support systems, maternal and familial influences, articulation of African American identity, and interactions with other African American undergraduate women. Although specific experiences varied, the four themes were reflected throughout each participant’s experiences. A preliminary review of relationships among codes identified the broad concept of how Black women are situated in external systems within society. Socialization occurs as a result of relationships with maternal figures and familial influences. As a result of the meaning-making process, Black women are better able to articulate their identity development. They internalize and make meaning for themselves; they test out their beliefs and identity through interactions with others. While refining the meaning of their identity development, they are as a result, fine-tuning what is becoming their own individual identity. That identity then becomes externalized as they carry it out in their everyday lives. This process is cyclical as experiences and interactions do not present themselves as isolated incidents. The fluidity of events and learned values within a Black woman’s journey show up in various ways at any given time and can be articulated simultaneously. Specifically, Black college women must mentally negotiate the spaces in which they can and should express their authentic selves in public (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Educational spaces were initially created around Whiteness (Banks, 2009); thus Black women in the collegiate environment are challenged by historical and institutional contexts that are always present as they negotiate potential relationships and interactions with others.
Four Themes

The identity development of the participants was influenced by the four themes. Their individual and collective support systems painted a macro-level picture of the environment through which these women must navigate. Support groups such as the one in this study provide a space for African American women to express external and internal factors that influence their development. Participation in the group assisted their ability to share and engage with other African American women. These spaces allow African American women the opportunity to just be present, to reflect, and to nurture one another as members of an extended family.

Support Systems

"Being here, you kind of get a sense of how the world really is."

The participants articulated how they felt their identity as Black women was supported at the institution. Responses varied, and their interpretations of support included the following: a general sense of support on the campus as a whole, support from and relationships with faculty members, and support obtained from interactions with the African American women’s group. Lauren, a junior who transferred from an Historically Black College and University (HBCU) stated, “It was really different. I actually did really well [when I arrived]. I feel like I can actually do more being so much of a minority at this school.” Leslie, a fifth year senior, shared, “It’s a crazy huge network [of people and support].”

In addition to institutional support, all four women identified themselves as receiving support from being socially, culturally, and academically involved on campus. Each participant discussed being involved in a broad range of student organizations such as culturally based advocacy groups, programming boards, professional sororities, and volunteer-oriented groups. They also articulated the importance of their group of friends and families as support systems in their lives. All four participants reflected positively on their participation in the weekly support group for African American women. Lauren concluded, “They wanted to genuinely know how and what was going on. She [one of the facilitators] asked me how it made me feel. She really wanted to know how something made me feel. It’s really refreshing; I don’t feel judged when I go there.” Although the group only met once a week, the opportunity to connect with other women was of high value and needed. Crystal affirmed, “I just know that when I go there I can say anything and it won’t leave the room. One of the first meetings of every semester, you go and set your goals and they motivate you to keep it up every week... You form a sisterhood with the people in there.”

Many of the women who participated in the group were not acquainted prior to attending. Not only were the women able to form connections with one another, but the relationships formed with the facilitators proved to be just as powerful. Leslie recognized, “It’s like kicking it with your girlfriends. We chill, we laugh, we eat, we vent, we offer each other advice, we scold each other when necessary and we celebrate each other’s victories. I really like the group, because first of all it’s headed by two African American female psychologists and they’re strong professional women.” Ashley admitted, “Becoming a part of [the group] actually helped me to find more women like me. It is also making me a little more cognizant of what I am doing wrong. I think a lot of times Black women aren’t equipped with all of the things they need to...
teach their daughters...we get to this stage and we really just need help by receiving teaching and coaching. I think they’re [facilitators] really helping me fill in the pieces.”

The women articulated their feelings of support within the larger institution as well as on a smaller scale among their peers and facilitators in the group. Three of the four participants transferred from smaller campuses within the state and were seeking systems of support. A sincere adoration for the space was evident in their responses, yet the women’s desire for community on the larger campus was rooted in something that stemmed from a much deeper place—the relationships with their mothers.

Maternal and Familial Influences

“She instilled in me to always believe in myself.”

Although all of the participants discussed the importance of the group, they passionately described the influence of their mothers’ ability to shape their socialization processes. Whether they were exposed to a certain faith, learned strategies for survival, or were expected to follow high standards for success, the impact of their mothers’ strength was embedded in their identities. Ashley’s discussion of teaching and coaching was a common denominator among the women. While all four women spoke candidly of foundational teachings and preparation they received while growing up, the most passionate conversations circulated around the strength and values they carry due to maternal and familial influences. The following codes were illustrated throughout the interviews: spirituality and the influence of religion, family order (being the oldest or youngest), and role of their mothers and other family members.

For both Ashley and Leslie, spirituality played a role in their families from the very beginning. Ashley declared, “God has been a big part of my life and I guess the part that is holding us all together and keeping us sane in our family.” Similarly Leslie said, “Growing up in the church has been a big deal in terms of the way that I was brought up and raised.” For both Ashley and Leslie, a belief in God guided their childhoods and continues to mold their identities as Black women.

Birth order also shaped their individual perspectives of responsibility to and within their families. Crystal stated that, as the oldest, “It’s extra stressful because I already know my parents are expecting me to do major things, and it’s one thing to let yourself down if you don’t get the results you want, but once you start letting other people down in the process, it sucks even more.” Similar to Crystal, both Ashley and Leslie are the oldest sisters/daughters among their siblings. Leslie asserted, “Being the oldest has taught me the importance of setting a good example for other people who come after you; it taught me to look out for my family. I have to be the strong one.” Ashley professed, “Being the oldest has given me a lot of courage and strength. Because I am a first generation college student in my family, I know that anything is possible.” Strength, both mental and emotional, was a characteristic that all four women attached to themselves and to their experiences, but when specifically discussing the role of their mothers, the trait carried even more weight in their eyes.

Lauren simply yet passionately maintained, “My mom is extremely strong.” Leslie wanted the primary researcher to fully understand when she declared, “My mom is just strong; you can’t tell me that my mom isn’t strong.” She delved a bit deeper and shared, “…she [her mom] was
trying to get her first degree in education as a teacher with three kids, she’s working two jobs, making sure the house is taken care of and we never went hungry, and we never longed for clothing.” Ashley also articulated experiences of her mother. “She had a rough life. She didn’t have the opportunities I had, so she was living her life through me. She did what was best for me, and that was all that mattered.” The diversity of life experiences among the women regarding their mothers was evident. However, regardless of challenging individual circumstances, their mothers prepared each participant for life’s journeys with unconditional love and inspiration.

The enthusiasm behind the participants’ voices as they highlighted their mothers’ love was obvious; their eyes and smiles grew bigger with each story. The values of spirituality, responsibility, and strength underscored their respective experiences and molded their senses of self. The foundations that had been established by their mothers serve as internal voices of guidance.

Articulation of Racial Identity

“I know who I am. I’ve defined for myself; I set the standard.”

The influence of family in the lives of the participants has affected not only their socialization processes but also the development of their racial and gender identities. The participants were encouraged to share personal examples, voice interpretations, and articulate how they make meaning of their identity as Black or African American women. Codes included discussion around self-awareness, usage of terminology and personal definitions, challenges, and points of empowerment.

As previously discussed, the terminology used when identifying racial/ethnic identity within the African/African American/Black community is an on-going conversation. There is not one universal term with which people within the larger community identify. This discussion of racial/ethnic identity remains current as differences among generations and distinctions among individuals are still prevalent. Ashley admitted, “For me personally, African American is a little tricky because I consider myself Black. I don’t know where I am from.” Lauren responded, “I’m African, but he [her father] made sure that there was no difference growing up. We [Africans and African Americans] are completely on the same level.” Leslie mentioned, “I’d say I’m Black or African American.” Crystal stated, “I’d rather identify myself as being Nigerian...I acknowledge however, that we all have different ethnicities but when we sign up for anything, we are all checking the same box. Whether I identify myself as African American or not, I know that I still am.” During each interview, all four women identified with various terms as they shared stories and when they described their peers and families.

The conversations around terminology guided the discussion into their personal definitions and thoughts regarding the meaning of identity as African American women. Ashley concluded, “African American womanhood...I think it stands for independence; it stands for strength and love and everything that our culture embraces.” Crystal noted, “I actually think that being an African American woman is a blessing.” Lauren said, “Strength to me is always being able to be genuinely optimistic. As a Black woman, you have to always be able to maneuver your way out of things, to get things done, to get where you’re trying to be.” Overall the participants seemed to garner a sense of inspiration from identifying as Black/African/African American and woman.
All four women became even more passionate when voicing their perspectives regarding the challenges faced by African American women. Leslie recognized the following:

Being an African American woman, just here in [city where host institution is located], sometimes people expect you to take on the role of the angry Black woman. Sometimes you’re just being opinionated, but it’s looked at as “oh, she is being the angry Black woman.” Sometimes you are the only African American in the workplace or in the classroom, and in your mind you think “I’m going to be perceived as the angry Black woman.” But sometimes, you just have to tell yourself, “I’ll say what I have to say, even if people aren’t going to be so open to it.”

Crystal admitted, “For me, growing up being seen as an African American woman does have more pressure on you. I feel like there is pressure on me to succeed instead of resting on stereotypes.” Ashley shared, “I feel like every day is a challenge for people to take me seriously. Being a woman and being Black, you just aren’t taken seriously and you’re not accepted.” Lauren asserted, “Because we are supposed to be looked at like this superwoman. We’re supposed to pick up all the slack for Black men; we’re supposed to pick up the slack for Black people in general, the kids, education, and the list goes on.” She continued, “Since we are picking up all these things, we don’t ever know how to handle situations; we don’t express ourselves, we just keep it inside. A lot of Black women just keep it inside. We don’t say how we feel when we feel it.”

The passion and self-awareness that began the conversation soon turned into a sense of urgency and frustration. Regardless of how the women chose to identify racially or ethnically, the realization of how society views and interacts with African American women as a whole was very clear in their minds. As they articulated the challenges they face as African American women, the more specific they became about issues impacting their interactions with other African American women on campus and within the larger society.

Interactions with Other African American Women

“We need to step our game up.”

The women shared anecdotal stories and candid conversation concerning the reality of both positive and negative interactions with other African American women. Lauren discussed the following:

I hate it when Black women say, “I don’t like hanging out with Black women; I would rather hang out with the guys. Guys are really accepting; guys are the ones who are nice.” I don’t agree with that at all, I think that if something bad happens or if someone hurts your feelings, or if someone dies, the first person you call is always a girl. You always call women; the people you depend on the most, like your mom and sisters. I don’t care how much you try to defend it; women help women out more than men can ever help out a woman.

Ashley reflected, “On any other campus they [African American women] say hi or smile and acknowledge you. Here they will keep it moving, keep their head up, or walk with their nose straight up. It hurts because we’re in this together; we should be communicating, we should be networking.” Leslie concluded, “We need to lift each other up because we already know the rest of the world is giving us a hard time, why do we need to give each other a hard
At the end of the day, the stereotypes that you’re facing, or the obstacles in this world that you’re facing are the same ones that are coming at me. Even though my background may be different from yours, we’re all facing the same obstacles. Why tear you down when I could lift you up?”

Underneath their articulated frustration was a sincere yearning for change in the way African American/Black women interact with one another. The rhetorical questions posed and genuine feelings of hurt may never be answered or acknowledged in one interview or support group. However, building community among other African American women is imperative for one’s individual growth and identity. African American women are influenced by one another and their relationships with each other influence how they see themselves. As expressed through experiences shared by each participant, identity development is very real and relevant to the larger community of African American women in higher education.

**DISCUSSION**

This study identified factors that influence the identity development and meaning-making of Black undergraduate women at a PWI in the Southeast. Considering the original framework of Kegan (1994), meaning-making in the identity development of Black women is connected to their relationships and interactions with others. Codes were collapsed into themes pertaining to support systems, maternal and familial influences, articulation of African American identity, and interactions with other African American undergraduate women. The participants discussed socialization processes that took place before arriving on campus and while on campus, that influenced their identity of being both Black and female. They articulated their meanings based on their interactions with mothers, family members, members of faculty and staff, and other African Americans on campus. Cross and Phagen-Smith (2001) articulated these adolescent experiences in their revised Black identity development model that included a life span perspective as opposed to the original model of Nigrescence that focused more on the process of becoming Black for adults (Cross, 1971).

Zamani (2003) argued that both gender and race have the ability to shape educational experiences. Leslie, the oldest participant and only non-transfer student, revealed her perspective about the university’s climate and retention rates for African American students. The participants were grateful to be members of the African American women’s support group. They defined for themselves who they were individually, including their varying ways of describing their identities, and also related to each other as a collective of African American women (Collins, 2000) within the contexts of their environments. The facilitators provided the space for them to acknowledge and name the simultaneous oppressions (King, 1988) that they as African American women experienced differently from White women and African American men (Beale, 1979).

Through the process of participation in this study, the women learned more about who they were by telling stories of their childhood and their mothers. Each woman spoke passionately about her mother, the strength she exuded, and the love she provided as an African American woman. Leslie and Ashley illustrated their mother’s strength by sharing what Dill (1979) termed...
The values their mothers instilled became important aspects of participants’ characters. The maternal and familial influences on their abilities to navigate collegiate life drove a yearning for systems of support, and most importantly, the desire to be in relationship with other African American women. Relationships with other African American women, however, are a direct result of the way in which one’s identity is manifested. The ability of African American women to carry a defined awareness of self, let alone a positive sense of self, is not a linear process nor does it happen overnight. As the participants shared, the process began in the early stages of their socialization, was nurtured by supportive staff members and social circles in college, and ultimately became an important aspect of their identity. They are learning to make meaning of their identity development as African American women in relationship with others, particularly other African American women.

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although the number of participants in this study was small, the women were articulate about the factors that influenced their identity development, and their perspectives reflected the same themes although their circumstances were different. The data serve as a foundation for understanding, through which various perspectives provide insight into the common lived experiences of African American women. This was an initial, pilot study that informed a larger, more in-depth analysis of Black undergraduate women. As a result of the small number of participants, applicability of the findings is limited. This study presented four perspectives of varying familial structures in which women were raised, as well as differing levels of experiential learning and meaning-making due to differences in age. Three of the four women transferred into the host institution from other colleges within the state. Despite the varying educational experiences and histories of the women, the codes and emergent themes were consistent and accurate, as each participant was able to share perspectives that contributed to the four themes.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

Although African American women share historical, social, and psychological challenges and successes, a collective story cannot be expressed in one study. Future research should increase the participant sample size and draw from multiple institutions in order to gain broader representation of individual experiences. Future research studies should also explore how African American women at historically Black colleges and universities make meaning of their experiences and identity development. Three recommendations to guide practice in our work with African American/Black undergraduate women are addressed below:

**Being Both African American/Black AND Female**

Allow the space for African American/Black women to speak from both identities. Students often feel forced by systems and organizational structures to “pick” a primary identity. African American women show up, exist, and survive through the lens of being both African American and female at the same time. An African American woman cannot
remove her Blackness in order to simply experience her gender, nor can she remove her
gender to be just African American/Black (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones &
McEwen, 2000). Having an African American or Black Cultural Center and a Women’s
Center separate from one another is not enough. In this study, women spoke more
specifically to race than gender, and within the collegiate environment, being a woman is
not unusual. Being Black is unusual and being a Black woman is even more unusual. Thus,
spaces that advocate for the multiple dimensions of a Black woman’s identity and meaning-
making of her development will enable her to fully embrace who she is.

**Formalized Space for Relationship and Community Building**

Create formalized and structured spaces for African American/Black women students to be in
relationships with one another. Providing such separate spaces (e.g., a cultural or women’s
center), or physical spaces that provide similar services and functions, does not guarantee the
fostering of relationship among African American women. Support groups, sister circles,
African American women’s retreats, and student organizations created and facilitated by both
students and administrators are necessary for persistence, retention, and success. Administrators
who oversee cultural and women’s centers have an amazing, yet necessary, opportunity to foster
collaborations, garner financial resources, and hire staff members who are able to meet and serve
the needs of African American women.

**Mentorship/Role of Administrators**

African American/Black undergraduate women need to be able to see administrators who
look like them in leadership positions on campus. They rely heavily on the support of maternal
figures, so mentoring relationships are vital to their success. This does not mean that only
African American women can or should serve as mentors to students; however, such women can
serve as invaluable role models. African American women students find value in the support and
trust of administrators and faculty members who genuinely care about their well-being, success,
and overall identity development.

As more African American/Black women enroll in and graduate from institutions of
higher education, our responsibility as researchers, teachers, and administrative professionals
is to support them as they make meaning of and develop their identities. We need to
acknowledge the importance of relationships within students’ meaning-making processes
(Kegan, 1994) and provide the spaces for such relationships to exist. We must recognize
our role in their identity development and combat the various forms of marginalization and
hegemony (Collins, 2000) that African American/Black women experience in the collegiate
environment. Finally, we must acknowledge that the identity development of African
American/Black women is not a journey to navigate by oneself; it must be understood as
the intersectionality of ongoing experiences through which these women survive and thrive
as a collective.
REFERENCES


